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SUBJECT: GABON: AFRICOM COMMANDER'S SUCCESSFUL VISIT

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Classified By: DCM Nathan Holt for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) AFRICOM General William Ward's December 4-6 visit to Libreville found officials from both the Government of Gabon and the Economic Community of Central African States pressing for information on when and where AFRICOM will establish a headquarters or other facilities on the continent. Gabonese President El Hadji Omar Bongo Ondimba also had some advice: adopt a regional strategy to avoid jealousy by countries passed over as a headquarters location. Gen. Ward stressed that no decisions have been made on headquarters locations, that he is committed to consulting widely, that AFRICOM is coordinating a broad program of U.S. security assistance that is already in place, and that AFRICOM provides focus and efficiency that was impossible when the continent was divided among three different U.S. military commands. The message appeared to resonate well with a wide range of audiences, including the Gabonese media and Libreville-based French military officers and diplomats. End Summary.

Questions and Advice from President Bongo

12. (C) Meeting General Ward less than a week after celebrating his 40th anniversary in power, Gabonese president El Hadji Omar Bongo Ondimba was characteristically blunt in his first question: "Where will AFRICOM put its headquarters?" Ward replied as he did throughout the visit: no decisions have been made, but we are still consulting with friends about options. One option is a single headquarters on the African continent, Ward explained. Another is to have some form of decentralized headquarters presence in various regions. Bongo urged a regional approach. If AFRICOM is based in one country, the other 53 African states will not understand and will be hostile, he said. To set up a headquarters in an Anglophone state would put off the Francophones, and vice versa, the president argued. If AFRICOM pursues a regional strategy, Bongo said, he will support the concept and promote it with other countries.

13. (C) Ward thanked the president for his counsel. "We appreciate your support because you understand our true purpose," Ward said. But other reactions have not been as positive, he explained, and AFRICOM is continuing a deliberate program of explaining its objectives and consulting with African countries and regional

organizations. AFRICOM will not rush to any decisions, Ward emphasized. It is important to take time to make careful decisions, Bongo replied, but "once the decision is made you must move fast after that." Africa is complex and has many problems, Bongo added, and AFRICOM will need to focus on bilateral as well as regional relations.

¶4. (C) Ambassador Reddick echoed Ward's message that AFRICOM is a component of U.S. foreign policy. The State Department, and the Embassy, would work closely with General Ward, the Gabonese Government, and others to coordinate our bilateral and cooperation, she explained. Defense Minister Ali Bongo, present throughout the meeting and serving as translator, stumbled on the General's final military metaphor. Every day, Ward said, a soldier gets up and "tries to improve his foxhole." The meaning was eventually teased out--we will be persistent in building AFRICOM, whatever the obstacles--and the 45-minute session concluded with smiles and handshakes.

Meeting the Defense Minister

¶5. (C) Earlier on the morning of December 5, Ward met separately with Defense Minister Ali Bongo for a more free-flowing discussion. Gabon is not influenced by AFRICOM's opponents, Bongo said. Libya is against AFRICOM, he explained, because Qadhafi is lobbying for a single African army under the United States of Africa--which he would control. Some "European friends" also go behind our backs and spread doubt about AFRICOM, Ali Bongo asserted.

Gabon recognizes that the African Union alone cannot provide security, and that a balanced approach to external assistance is required. "No more troops in Africa" was a recurring theme in France before the last election, Ali Bongo said, and the dynamics of French engagement may be shifting. Darfur also absorbs enormous attention and international resources, he added.

¶6. (C) AFRICOM's regional focus could be useful in developing a more comprehensive approach to problems like Darfur, Ali Bongo asserted. Gabonese peacekeepers in the Central African Republic help stabilize one of Sudan's many troubled neighbors, and CEEAC's recent military exercise in Chad's Bahr-el-Ghazal region was an important step forward in the regional body's ability to project forces into remote and difficult terrain. AFRICOM support for CEEAC could reinforce those positive trends. (The Defense Minister added that Chadian president Idriss Deby had pushed hard for the Bahr-el-Ghazal exercise as a show of force to Chadian rebels. Other CEEAC leaders hesitated, however, fearing the exercise would provoke a rebel response.)

CEEAC

¶7. (C) CEEAC's Secretary General Sylvain Goma was out of Libreville during Ward's visit, and he declined to allow a newly-arrived deputy to formally receive the AFRICOM commander at CEEAC headquarters. General Ward and his party were nevertheless able to meet unofficially with the Deputy Secretary General in charge of administration, Claude Tike Tike, and with the outgoing CEEAC Deputy Secretary General for Peace and Security, Ambassador Nelson

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Cosme.

¶8. (C) Cosme told us that CEEAC heads of state now understand AFRICOM better. However, some issues still need clarification. For instance, some states fear that AFRICOM will lead to reductions in USAID of other USG assistance. When asked how he thought AFRICOM could help CEEAC, Cosme said the organization could use assistance in

telecommunication, training for the stand-by force, maritime safety and logistics, and air safety. Ward said all of these elements could be covered by current or planned U.S. initiatives. Like President Bongo, Cosme stressed that to effectively engage CEEAC we must first engage the leadership of CEEAC member states. Cosme nevertheless also urged that AFRICOM training and material assistance be coordinated, and if possible disbursed, through CEEAC.

Talking to the French

¶ 9. (C) General Ward and his party also had breakfast with a group of Libreville-based French diplomats and military officers, who peppered him with questions. The Deputy Commander of French Forces in Gabon explained that Libreville is a good base for French regional activities, since CEEAC leadership, its planning cell, and the nucleus of its future standby brigade are all based here. If AFRICOM is to support CEEAC, he asked, will there be coordination with France? Certainly, Ward replied, once a decision was reached on when and how AFRICOM will engage. AFRICOM will also work closely with African countries and several regional organizations--not just CEEAC. Ward pointed out that there is a French liaison officer helping to plan and execute the program of the Navy's Africa Partnership Station (APS). Ward also noted that he had consulted only the previous week with French General Georges Alain about AFRICOM matters.

¶ 10. (C) The French DCM interjected that French support for CEEAC is through the European Commission, and that the EC is currently CEEAC's primary donor. Multilateral efforts are better than bilateral ones, she contended.

Need for a Security Assistance Office

¶ 11. (C) General Ward had a working lunch with Ambassador Reddick and her country team in the Embassy's conference room. Whatever decision is made about the location of AFRICOM's headquarters or regional offices, the Ambassador

said, Embassy Libreville urgently needs a Security Assistance Office (SAO) of at least two people to support the expanding program of military engagement in Gabon and Sao Tome, and to provide a platform for any further expansion of AFRICOM activities. The Ambassador also led Ward and his team on a short tour of our small chancery, pointing out space the SAO could occupy. Ward replied that AFRICOM recognizes the need to establish more SAOs on the continent and will look closely at Libreville. AFRICOM does not yet have a full complement of headquarters staff, he pointed out, and is tackling several difficult staffing issues simultaneously. The Ambassador thanked General Ward for his visit, and that of the AFRICOM Survey Team (Ref. A) in November, and said that the Embassy is committed to doing all it can to make AFRICOM a success.

Positive Media Coverage

¶ 12. (C) Local media coverage of the generals' visit was extensive and largely positive, drawing heavily on Washington-cleared, Embassy-supplied materials. Accounts of the visit appeared in Gabonese newspapers, radio, television and internet sites, with many repeating the theme that AFRICOM's objective is to work closely with African nations and regional organizations, and bring better coordination to security assistance programs that are already underway. Reuters and Radio France International (RFI) also covered the visit, although RFI lost its tape and was unable to broadcast excerpts from a one-on-one interview with General Ward as he emerged from

his meeting with President Bongo. The Bongo meeting was a focus for most local press reports. There was, to our knowledge, no negative or critical coverage.

Comment

¶13. (C) General Ward's visit was quite successful, and we hope to welcome him back to Libreville soon. Gabon remains a willing partner for AFRICOM initiatives. President Bongo's advice to adopt a regional approach, deserves serious consideration. So does his recommendation to consult widely, then act quickly once we decide when and where AFRICOM will deploy on the African continent. End Comment.

REDDICK